



SADF COMMENT

The ‘Boundary Settlement’ Between India and China: A Dilemma

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Following Narendra Modi’s maiden visit to China in May 2015, the Joint Statement that was released by India and China, affirmed that: “*an early settlement of the boundary question serves the basic interests of the two countries and should be pursued as a strategic objective by the two governments*”. Nonetheless, this joint determination to seek a political settlement to the protracted border issue is tainted by great pessimism and speculations. Despite a strong political will on each side, and incentives, such as various agreements and confidence building measures, the ‘boundary problem’ remains unresolved and rather more complicated. Neville Maxwell rightly notes: “*the border dispute between India and China stands exactly where it did when it first emerged half a century ago*”.

The increased military standoffs between Indian and Chinese troops at the disputed border further delay the political settlement, and add fuel to the stagnancy. Given this, what is noteworthy is that although on the surface, the India-China border remains peaceful, it still serves as a delicate flashpoint in the bilateral relationship. There remains a compounded risk of escalation as a result of miscalculations born out of ‘trust deficit’.

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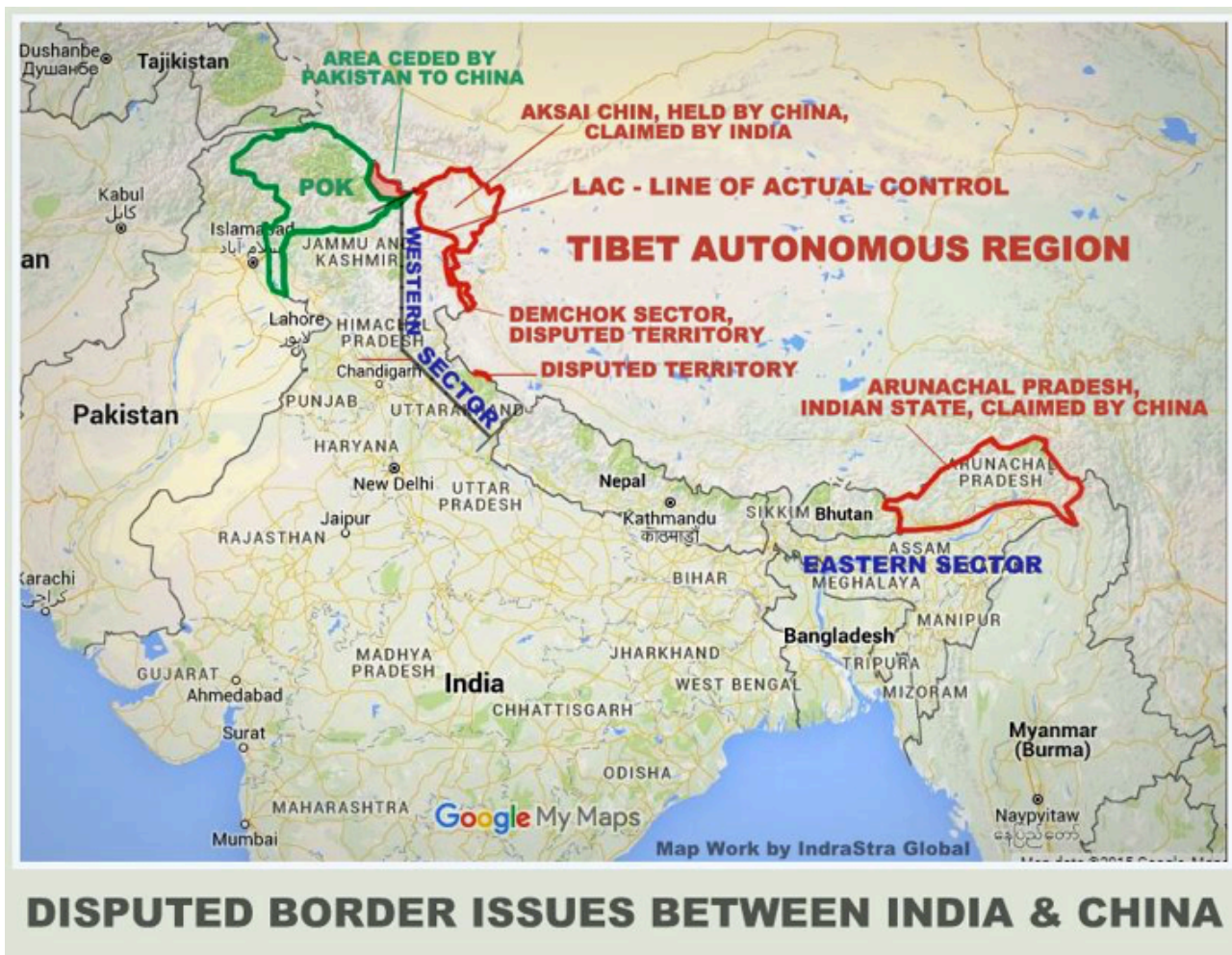
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The territorial dispute between India and China exists in two areas of the Himalayan frontier: in the Eastern Sector, in Arunachal Pradesh (around 83,740 square kilometres) and in the Western Sector, in Aksai Chin (around 37,250 square kilometres). Arunachal Pradesh is administered by India as a state while Aksai Chin is administered by China as part of Xinjiang. The problem lies in the Line of Actual Control (LAC), which is a 4,056-kilometre long boundary between India and China that remains undefined, yet to be demarcated on the ground and delineated on maps. These complexities have turned the ‘territorial issue’ into a perpetual dilemma between India and China, thereby, making the early settlement of the boundary issue almost unlikely in the near future.

That is, despite a strong political will between India and China to resolve the ‘boundary problem’, the feasibility to reach such a resolution remains highly questionable. This can be explained as follows:

First, the ‘border talks’ as confidence building measures have failed to make any significant progress. Since 2003, after eighteen rounds of border talks between the Special Representatives of India and China, there has been no headway in resolving the issue. Both sides agreed to conform to the guidelines and norms put forward in the 2005 agreement on ‘Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question’- which has failed to provide a solid base to the resolution process. By signing that agreement, India and China have crossed the first stage, where both have reached the agreement to settle the boundary question. The second stage, which has been on building the “framework for resolution of the boundary question,” has been evolving for the past eight years. And that only after drawing the “framework” will the two sides be able to proceed to the third stage of the talks that entails “demarcation on maps of any framework agreement and delineation on the ground”. It is clear that as the dispute has been ongoing since 1962, similarly, the negotiations also seem to be taking a long path to finally arrive at a firm resolution. That is, as the negotiations are still in an unfolding stage and not resulting in a constructive outcome, it has become difficult to predict a fixed deadline towards settling the protracted boundary question. The border talks have thus become a customary mechanism of conflict management rather than that of conflict resolution.

Second, there is a brimming military instability along the border after two decades of relative peace. The Chinese incursions along the LAC have gradually increased in the recent past. Exemplary of this action is the most recent case of India’s dismantling of a Chinese built watchtower causing a standoff between Indian and Chinese troops in the Burtse region of northern Ladakh. This has been preceded by various standoffs as a result of Chinese incursions in the Depsang region in Ladakh. Most importantly, in 2013 a twenty-day standoff at Burthe in Daulat Beg Oldie (DOB) sector brought both India and China into a near-military confrontation on their unsettled border in Ladakh. While in September 2014, a sixteen day military face-off at the Chumar sector of Eastern Ladakh after a high-level flag meeting between the two parties, which strategically coincided with Chinese President Xi Jinping’s maiden visit to India, gave a jolt to the relations amidst ‘Modi-Xi’ diplomatic engagement. Therefore, these increasing episodes of military standoffs contribute to further mistrust and thus, significantly hinder, the boundary settlement between India and China.

And, lastly, both sides have increased their military build-up along the border. China has deployed almost 300,000 troops along the border, while India has approximately 200,000 to 220,000 troops stationed in the regions bordering China. On one hand, the latter has also made huge infrastructure build up in Tibet, and it is well equipped to move large military division along the LAC and has also transferred its CSS-5 missiles to Tibet. On the other hand, India has upgraded as well its military deployments in Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim and, Northern Ladakh to prevent any Chinese land-grab. It has also launched a crash program to improve its logistical capabilities through new roads, airstrips, and advanced landing stations along the Himalayas. India is also reported to have placed Su-30s into the Eastern sector, and has also moved its Agni II and Prithvi III missiles to the border areas. These hard balancing tactics are further destabilising the resolution process.

Therefore, from the above assessments it can be rightly said that the India-China boundary problem has become an anathema in their relations, wherein a peaceful resolution of the territorial crisis itself has become a dilemma for India and China. Hence, there is very little space between India and China to take a step forward in the boundary settlement.

Biography of the author:

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